Managing Multimedia Madness:
Evaluating Mass Market, Educational, and ESL/EFL Software for Computer Assisted Language Learning in Japan

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In deciding whether to work computer assisted language learning (CALL) into a curriculum, it's important to ask what is missing from the current mix offered in our classrooms and language laboratories, and what computers and available software can do to provide what's missing. Learner needs and curricular goals vary, of course, with each institution. Yet there are some areas of concern common to many teachers in Japan, such as: homework and student-directed study; special assistance for students in multi-level classes; in-class speaking practice in English; and authentic, yet level-appropriate content. If appropriate software is selected and appropriate methods are implemented, CALL can effectively be used to address each of these issues.

First, assigning homework may present difficulties to native English-speaking teachers in Japanese universities due to differences in expectations of the institution and students. Teachers in Japan may find it difficult to require students to buy, for example, an additional workbook containing homework exercises or a grammar reference book. In addition, because many students are accustomed to a one-text class, where all tests, homework, and lectures are based on a single volume, they seem to have difficulty assigning priority to a handout or assigned activity not in the main textbook. As a result of these difficulties, a teacher may adjust either the amount or

the type of homework given to better suit the expectations of the students and their educational institution.

CALL offers an appeal other mediums do not, due to its enhanced audio and visual elements. Thus, software-based homework has the potential of aiding student motivation. In addition, if appropriate, high-quality software is chosen, tie-ins with themes or skills studied in class may make the relevance of the lessons clear to the student. Also, because the assignment is to be done in the computer lab, students may place it at a higher priority status than handouts and other supplementary material not in the main text. Teachers can also take advantage of the perceived value and appeal of computers due to current workplace and social trends toward expanded computer use.

The concern of assisting students with lower-level abilities in multi-level classes through student-directed study can also be addressed through CALL. Software which asks the student to make decisions on which lesson to do first, how many times the question is repeated, whether to repeat a section or be satisfied with the current score, or when to take a test on material studied can help students gain valuable skills in self-directed learning and self-assessment. These are precisely the skills students with lower-level abilities in multi-level classes need to help themselves.

Software can also be used to provide material and motivation for in-class speaking practice. The best types of software for this purpose are simulations and mass-market or educational multimedia products made for native speakers. Since the potential market is much larger for mass-market than for

ESL/EFL software, publishers seem to be placing the most creativity and high-quality audio, video, graphics and interfaces into mass-market products for adults and children. Mass-market products considered here include entertainment, reference, and simulation software as well as the hybrid "edutainment" software becoming increasingly popular. On the other hand, educational products for native speakers may not be equally video and graphic-heavy, so in quality and design they come in second place, but their educational value may be quite high. Many educational products are currently being produced for use in primary and secondary schools. In third place in terms of general product quality and development is software made specifically for the language learner. Although some thorough ESL/EFL courseware is available that intends to replace the textbook, unfortunately, the variety of ESL/EFL products available remains limited, and the quality remains widely varied.

To provide in-class speaking practice, mass-market software that tells a story, such as *From Alice To Ocean* (Against All Odds Productions), can be adapted in a lab setting. To practice oral summaries, students can be asked to form pairs. One partner watches and listens to a segment, then is asked to summarize what was learned orally to the other partner. An alternative speaking exercise with a single CD-ROM involves students watching a CD-ROM with the video portion only and the sound turned off. As the pictures appear, one partner narrates the story to the other partner. Students I have tried this with find the challenge of a continuously changing image about which to speak exciting and motivating. The privacy afforded by the

individual monitors in a lab setting, along with the easier playback and cuing ability of the CD-ROM over a video make this activity work in the Japanese learning environment. If tape recorders are available, as they are in many computer labs, students can also record their narration and play them back for their partners while the video is repeated, or keep the recordings for later self-evaluation.

Software can further be used in language learning to provide authentic, yet level-appropriate content. That is, the CD-ROM encyclopedia, historical software, or other educational materials students use would be the same as those used in schools across the U.S., without the cost, storage space, or the cumbersome nature of the printed volumes. Because many titles are designed for students, they use a limited vocabulary helpful for ESL/EFL students. However, most encyclopedias and multimedia educational reference software come on CD-ROM instead of floppy disks, so the cost prohibits purchase of enough copies for use by individual students. Therefore, encyclopedia or reference software-based lessons for classes in a computer lab use a main computer to "broadcast" a certain segment. This can be set up as a timed reading, or students can gain practice in note-taking or close listening. Oral summaries by students in pairs is another option.

In this brief overview of use of mass-market, educational, and ESL/EFL software for CALL, it is clear that the potential variations in use of this medium are great. By choosing appropriate software, and then performing careful evaluation as to methods for its use in the classroom or self-study lab, CALL can address difficult language learning issues including:

homework and student-directed study; special assistance for students in multi-level classes; in-class speaking practice in English; and authentic, yet level-appropriate content.

Software Evaluation Checklist

The evaluation of software is more difficult than the evaluation of more traditional materials for a variety of reasons. First, due to the high cost of software production and the ease with which it may be duplicated, it is rare that a teacher has the opportunity to view the software before purchasing. In cases in which demonstration disks are provided, often only a small sampling of the software is available, and often the demo disk does not include any supplemental student materials, manuals, or teacher's guidebooks. It is also more difficult to "page through" software than a textbook, due to the simple fact that the demo disk, the teacher, and the computer equipment must all be in the same room at the same time. Furthermore, many titles, whether made for ESL/EFL, educational, or mass-market sales, are not sold in Japan, but instead must be ordered from a catalogue. And since the field is constantly changing, an up-to-the-minute title six months ago may be old-fashioned and clumsy in six months. In addition, according to J. Schreck and R. Schreck, "...few other modes of instruction are as self-contained and thus as potentially frustrating if the learning experiences they provide are of poor quality" (1991). For these reasons, careful evaluation of software before and after purchase is vital.

I have experimented with various software types, approaches, and methods for CALL lessons as the instructor of a year of drop-in computer tutorial sessions and as the teacher of

a year-long communication course which used software as "textbook." The following checklist headings are from *Computer-Assisted Language Learning*, by J. Schreck and R. Schreck, in *Teaching English as a Second Language, 2nd ed.*, M. Celce-Murcia, Editor. The checklist items are intended to provide a general overview of areas of concern. The comments are mine and based on use of various software titles by students at Asia University.

Are Goals and Objectives Clearly Stated?

Even with regard to traditional textbooks, the interpretation of the words "clearly stated" is a matter of contention. Many software titles emphasize a particular skill or set of skills, which is sometimes clear in the title or introduction. However, because software offers learners a degree of choice in its use, sometimes the skill focused on in the main body of the program is not the one students most enjoy or spend most time doing. One example is *Shinbun Lite*, a popular and inexpensive title in a three-part series produced in Japan by ParaComm. When students use this software, it is not the reading skills sections that they tend to spend the most time on, but the pronunciation sections, in which students may record their own voices, hear a replay instantly, then compare their recording to a native speaker's.

For these reasons, the teacher must often make goals and objectives clear for students before or during software use. This is especially important when using mass-market materials made for native speakers. While a native speaker may use a CD-ROM encyclopedia or a story on CD-ROM such as *From Alice to Ocean* to gain information on the subject matter for a report or

simply for entertainment, a language learner might be encouraged to browse through this type of software to improve skills in skimming and scanning, global listening, or critical thinking, such as deducing from visual clues. If teacher expectations are clarified, it can become clear to the student that it isn't necessary to understand every word heard or read in the software. Students may be able to enjoy mass-market software for its enhanced audio and graphics while improving in precisely the skill areas in which many Japanese students seem to need particular improvement.

Is Content Accurate, Complete, and Non-trivial?

One way to assure that CALL lessons are not perceived as trivial or irrelevant by students is to assign lessons with a thematic or functional tie-in to the classroom lessons. There are many software titles available which offer this potential. One such title is *Listen!*, a listening-based set of two CD-ROMS published by Heinemann. Each CD-ROM offers ten brief lessons on topics such as "At a Restaurant," "Careers," "Prices," and "Days of the Week." The CD-ROM lessons consist of a series of questions, each based on its own colorful graphic, which lends context and interest to the question. The students use a mouse to answer the true/false or multiple choice questions. This CD-ROM also offers a recording feature, wherein the student is shown a picture, then asked a question. The student records an answer, then listens to automatic and immediate playback. The student may compare a native speaker's answer if desired, or re-record as many times as needed. An additional feature is the test section, which presents different types of questions from each of the topic areas on the CD-ROM. Because the software

contains lessons with clear listening-related goals, and topics offered are everyday and specific, the students I observed seemed to have little trouble perceiving the relevance of the lessons. Furthermore, the common topics allow easy tie-ins with themes found in typical language learning textbooks.

Another type of software which can offer students accurate, non-trivial information while offering teachers easy tie-ins to commonly-used themes are simulations. In this type of software, individuals or groups of students are given a role to play and a specific situation. In the simulation, *Decisions, Decisions: the Environment*, by Tom Snyder Productions, students play the roles of various city officials and experts in a fictional city plagued by a polluted pond and an aggressive mining company. Students set priorities and define goals, then each student or team reads the portion of the reference materials that apply to their assigned situation. Students make a series of decisions, and the consequences are displayed. Students are scored on how well they have met their self-determined priorities. Tom Snyder Productions provides a wealth of supplementary material, all containing accurate, complete, and non-trivial information related to the subject matter for each software title in the *Decisions, Decisions* series. Much of these materials also are aimed at teaching critical thinking skills. In light of the fact that much software is sold with nothing but a user's manual, this company provides the most complete sets of supplementary materials I have seen.

On the other hand, because this software is written for English native-speaking secondary school students, teachers will also need to clarify language learning goals. In particular,

software such as *The Environment* often contains high-level vocabulary, and requires relatively fast reading of short segments of text. Students may be confused or frustrated if they aren't first introduced to the notion that the simulation is a learning-by-doing activity as opposed to a reading-to-learn activity, as outlined by D. Bycina and F. Dublin in *Academic Reading and the ESL/EFL Teacher* (1991).

Another way to assure that the content of CALL lessons is not perceived as trivial by students is through evaluation of feedback. According to J. Schreck and R. Schreck (1991), feedback in CALL can range anywhere from a graphic reward such as a small animated image when a correct answer is given, to a simple √ or X each time an answer is given, to simply allowing the student to continue the lesson by moving the cursor to the next line or giving the next question. It is important to look at not only the frequency but also the type of feedback given. Some software, while requiring a high level of student involvement by asking students to answer questions continuously, may not offer an appropriate type of feedback when needed.

Welcome to English: Prepositions, by BEST English Software, is an example of drill and practice software. It teaches the meanings of "in," "on," "under," and other prepositions through simple pictures, aural questions about the pictures, and mouse-clicked answers. For the purpose and the low price, it is a useful program. However, the lessons are divided into several long series of questions. If even one incorrect answer is given, the learner is not allowed to go on to the next lesson, but instead must repeat the entire section until answers are 100% correct. The question this example

raises is, at what point do incorrect answers become trivial? Easy rerouting or exit of lessons is one advantage of a software-based as opposed to a cassette-based or textbook-based lesson. If full advantage is to be taken of the medium, then these options should be present at sufficient intervals in the lesson.

Another important factor in learner involvement is the type of response required. In Japan, learners are not likely to be familiar with the English keyboard, so software which requires a large amount of keyboarding can inadvertently lead students away from the intended curriculum. Therefore, mouse-controlled software is a wise choice.

Is Content Arranged in Meaningful, Logical Segments With Appropriate Emphasis on the Most Relevant or Important Information?

An example of this is in the CD-ROM *Astonishing Asia*, by InterOptica Publishing. It is a mass-market product which lets the user explore topics such as sports, traditional medicine, and death rites in different Asian countries. When I used this in my small communication class, students were very curious about their own countries of origin. What would it show about them? Yet when they discovered that all that was offered of Japan was *sumo*, while the more offbeat practices and traditions of India received five sections, they were dismayed and a bit confused. With a discussion of authorial intent, however, this shortcoming turned into a lesson in critical thinking , market considerations, and bias. Without teacher-initiated discussion, students may have been left confused about the Asian image in the West. Again, using mass-market software for language learning means that a lot of interesting and well-organized and

well-presented information may reach the student. Much design work in multimedia is devoted to arranging text and pictures in meaningful, logical, and bite-sized segments. However, what is most important to the language learner and to the native speaker is sometimes very different. Interface elements such as exit options, easy repeat and sound level adjustment features for audio, and easy rewind and repeat features for video can make the difference between a frustrating and an interesting, valuable learning experience.

Is Content Presented at an Appropriate Level of Reading Proficiency, Learning Difficulty, English Proficiency, and Cultural Awareness?

Because multimedia software is a relatively new field, and ESL/EFL software newer still, the quality of software on the market is enormously varied. Software with slick packaging, many colors, and 3-D animation can have atrocious sound quality and glitches which cause computer crashes. Other software can use only the most basic of multimedia capabilities, such as sound effects but no voice recordings or video, and a black and white interface, and still provide a quality language learning experience. An example of the latter is another simulation by Tom Snyder Productions titled, *International Inspirer*. The game asks teams or individuals to plot a course from an assigned country through ten other countries. Teams get points for passing through or ending in each country which fits their assigned parameters, such as "high movie attendance" or "low population density." The simulation requires only a single black-and-white computer in the classroom. The software staggers the assignments so that teams aren't lining up to see the screen, gives booklet-based assignments, then asks students

to return to the computer to get their scores and their next assignments.

Although this simulation was written for U.S. secondary school students, no reading is required except the four sentences on the computer which give the assignments, and the maps and charts of country statistics with English headings. The game proved so successful that I used it in every class I teach, from third-year English majors to freshman Economics majors to my sophomore communication class. Because the statistics were authentic, students were interested in reading the charts. Although there were a few technical terms, such as "emits greenhouse gases" and "high literacy rate," students seemed to recognize the timeliness and relevance of these terms. Also, the terms appeared in limited numbers, and the maps offered contextual clues. Cultural awareness was demonstrated in the manufacturer's choice of topics and its non-judgmental presentation of the facts. Students loved the arcade-like animation and sound effects when they came to the computer to receive their scores. Overall, *International Inspirer* is an excellent example of high-quality software made for educational use by native speakers that can be adapted easily and effectively for EFL/ESL use.

Are Directions, Instructions, and Extra "Help" Displays Clear, Concise, and Written at a Level of Difficulty No Greater Than That of the Main Content?

One way to make use of the variety and more advanced multimedia capabilities found in mass-market software, as opposed to ESL/EFL software, is to consider mass-market software made for children. *StoryMation II*, produced by ISM, Inc., is a graphics and text package that helps users write their own

storybooks. In this package, users select from fairy tale, dinosaur, or "main" (general) background, such as a cave, a witch's castle, or a neighborhood street scene. Users add characters from a list using the same three themes. Users may add objects as well. All items may be sized and placed on the page as desired. Then users may add text at the bottom of the page to tell their stories.

Because it was designed for younger users, the buttons and icons needed to manipulate the software are intuitive and offer clear opportunities to cancel and double-check a selection. I found that students in my tutorial sessions and in my communication class found making the stories using "cartoon" images and themes thoroughly enjoyable and not in the least patronizing. There is a limit, however, to student tolerance of cute cartoon images, so a careful look at the package before purchase should be taken.

There are two main drawbacks with using software made for children. One is that children's software writers often use idioms and slang to make the lessons seem more casual and game-like. This language can trip up the language learner even when other aspects of the software are level-appropriate. A second drawback is that in some cases the software manual is written in language beyond the level that appears on-screen. Given that Japanese students don't have the familiarity with standard software interfaces and computer manuals that American students might, supervision should be planned when these programs are introduced.

Does the Software Meet Specific Learner Needs As Well As Specific Curricular Goals and Objectives?

In any evaluation of CALL software, this question most likely must be answered before lab use and budgets can be approved, before the door to the computer lab is opened to language students, and before teachers become willing to begin building a CALL component into their classroom mix. Clearly, each institution must answer this question for itself. However, as a teacher who has seen the benefits of CALL--the student enthusiasm, the increased motivation, and the excitement at the wide variety of materials now becoming available--I submit a word of warning. Over-caution toward this new medium will mean missed opportunity. Taking advantage of the enthusiasm and respect students the world over seem to hold for the power and potential of computers in their futures is not as difficult as it may appear. Whether an institution starts small, with a single computer and simulation software in the classroom, or starts moderately, with student-directed computer study materials, allocated drop-in hours, and a well-organized check-out system, or leaps in on a large scale, with class sets of courseware for year-long class use in a lab, the important thing is that CALL has begun. So go ahead. Boot up, install, double-click, and see what happens.

References

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